

Installation Response: The Call to Congregation B'nai Israel

October 11, 2013

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The very first time that God speaks to Abraham in the Torah, in this week's Torah portion, God immediately asks Abraham to take his wife, Sarah, and their family, and to pick up and leave their ancestral home and his father's house, everything he has ever known, and move to a land of God's promise.

If that really were the first time that God speaks to Abraham, we might wonder about Abraham's judgment, agreeing to make such a drastic change and major move on the basis of an instruction from an unknown source. That's where the Midrash steps in. Most of us are familiar with the story of Abraham's father, the idol maker. To make a long story short, one day, when his father is away on business, Abraham smashes his father's idols. But the rabbis suggest that even that isn't the beginning of Abraham's relationship with God. Instead, the Midrash describes a meaningful relationship between God and Abraham, stretching all the way back to Abraham's birth, and even earlier. By the time that Abraham, at 75, heeds God's call to the Promised Land, God and Abraham know one another well.

Your Search Committee, the Board of Congregation B'nai Israel, and ultimately the entire congregation gathered on a dark and stormy night, did indeed ask Toni and me, together with Robert and Daniel, to pick up and leave our ancestral home, Texas, and even my father's house – well, five doors away. I had been in the same congregation for 21 years; and even though the time to go had clearly come, leaving is never easy. The rabbis make that clear in their analysis of Abraham's case.

None of us likes to leave what is comfortable. Moreover, without prior relationship, making such a move may be foolhardy.

Yes, I have known Rabbi Levy and Bobbye for over 30 years, and have had a relationship with the Grundfest family through mutual friends since childhood. Still, I really didn't know people here, and I didn't know Congregation B'nai Israel, a year ago.

Then, in December, a group of your Search Committee came to meet Toni and me – and to see me “in action,” as it were, in San Antonio. That Shabbat Eve, sitting around Toni's and my table, we felt, in some indescribable way, that these wonderful people were not new to us. We knew them, as Sarah and Abraham knew God, ineffably, long before they called us to what we would come to see as this land of new promise, Congregation B'nai Israel in Little Rock, Arkansas.

We share a common heritage and destiny. Even though my parents and I were all raised in Houston, I like to say that the “old country” in my family is the Delta. We had ancestors in Germany and Lithuania, to be sure, but the ones we knew were in Monroe, Louisiana and Kosciusko, Mississippi. We had reveled in a diverse congregation, like Congregation B'nai Israel – with Jews whose family have been Reform for generations, others who are new to Reform Judaism and still more who have come to Judaism on their own as adults. And when we spoke of a challenge of making Jewish life meaningful in a place where Jews are very much in the minority, we were speaking the same language.

No, I hadn't met many members of Congregation B'nai Israel until last winter, but at a deeper level, we knew one another. That “knowing” has been borne out in the welcome you have offered me and in the relationships we are building together.

Tonight is not the occasion for standing before you, to set out my plans or programs or ambitions for our community's future. Most importantly, those goals need to be set by rabbi and congregation in partnership. At the same time, I can tell you the key to whatever those goals or programs might be: We are building, and we will continue to strengthen, meaningful, sacred relationships. We know each other and we are getting to know one another. The more we truly understand one another, where we are coming from and where we want to go, the better we will be able to embark on sacred journeys, together.

This magnificent evening and the whole weekend, planned so meticulously and lovingly by Kennon Goldsholl and Julie Shindler – and, I hasten to add, Leah Elenzweig – is a beautiful expression of the relationships we are building. Your presence here is the same.

I am boundlessly grateful to Kennon, to Julie, and to Leah, to David and all our magnificent musicians, to all who have volunteered to make this weekend so beautiful, and to Toni's and my family and friends who have traveled from afar to share these sacred moments with us.

When Abraham reaches the Promised Land, the first thing he does is to build an altar, to give thanks to God. Many and varied have been the stages of our family's journey these last two years. Tonight, we are grateful that the altar, if you will, is already built. We have come to this place to give thanks.

Amen.